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Within-School Socioeconomic Disparities in Academic Achievement: A Qualitative Case Study of Study-Regulation Supports among Indian Secondary Students

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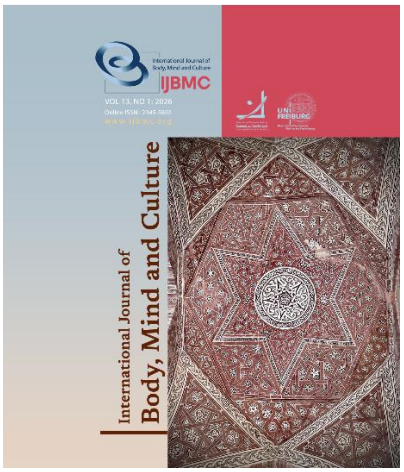

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explored how socioeconomic contexts shape students' study strategies and how these differences relate to academic achievement within the same school setting.

Methods and Materials: A single-site qualitative case study was conducted in a private, unaided English-medium CBSE school in Bengaluru, India, enrolling students from diverse socioeconomic status (SES) groups. Thirty students in Grades 8–9 (aged 13–15) were selected through purposive sampling, representing all achievement levels and residence types (day scholars and residential/hostel students). SES classification was informed by parental education/occupation and the Modified Kuppuswamy Scale (2019). Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews, audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed iteratively using line-by-line and focused coding guided by Charmaz's grounded theory approach, leading to theme development.

Findings: Three themes explained within-school achievement disparities: (1) parental engagement and access to cultural/social capital varied by SES, shaping monitoring, subject support, and study regulation at home; (2) hostel routines and mentoring provided compensatory structures resembling middle-class "concerted cultivation," supporting academic regulation for some low-SES residential students; and (3) for low-SES day scholars, teachers and remedial support served as the primary learning resource, often framed in skill-deficit terms rather than culturally responsive pedagogy.

Conclusion: Equal access to school resources does not necessarily produce equal outcomes because study regulation develops within unequal family and institutional support ecologies. Equity-oriented, culturally responsive, and relational school practices—alongside targeted academic mentoring—may help reduce persistent achievement gaps.

Keywords: socioeconomic status, academic achievement, study strategies, qualitative case study, India.

Introduction

Academic achievement is one of the most widely researched constructs in contemporary educational research. Traditionally, an individual's ability to study effectively has been considered a strong predictor of academic success. From this individualistic perspective, study skills and strategies encompass a wide range of tactics that help students learn efficiently, organize information, and recall it when needed (DiPerna, 2006). These skills, such as time management, planning, intrinsic motivation, need for cognition, and academic self-concept, are considered crucial to academic success (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Wang et al., 2023; West & Sadoski, 2011; Zimmerman, 1990). However, students are often expected to acquire these skills "naturally," and those who do not are viewed through a deficit lens, which leads to remedial instruction and support (Singh & Choudhary, 2015).

A growing body of research shows that academic achievement cannot be attributed solely to individual cognitive strategies; it is also shaped by a student's broader social and cultural context. For instance, students' educational outcomes are significantly influenced by their access to social capital, which includes familial support, peer networks, and community engagement (Boonk et al., 2018; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Fatimaningrum, 2021; Mishra, 2020). Parental involvement, family income, and parental education levels have been found to influence children's educational and social outcomes (Boonk et al., 2018; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). High-income families often invest more in educational resources and school-related activities for their children. In contrast, families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have a restricted capacity to provide the same level of support (Sengonul, 2022).

This disparity in access to resources and support emphasizes a deeper issue of educational inequality. Although students with the potential for high academic success exist at all economic levels, those from disadvantaged backgrounds often lag in achievement (Reardon, 2018). Research on education in the Global South often adopts a deficit perspective, portraying marginalized students as lacking the necessary skills and abilities for academic success (Robinson-Pant et al., 2015; Valencia, 2019). This model ignores structural inequalities and attributes low achievement to limited abilities, lack of motivation, and 'dysfunctional' backgrounds (Smit, 2012; Valencia, 2019). However, social reproduction theorists (Bourdieu, 2002) argue that access to capital- cultural, social, or economic- is not equally distributed but rather is socially structured and patterned to benefit those already privileged. This unequal transmission of advantageous social, cultural, and economic capital across generations, along with differences in parental education, leads to early and persistent disparities in educational outcomes between children of low and high SES (Sengonul, 2022).

Hence, schools can play a powerful role both in reproducing (Batruch et al., 2019; Bourdieu, 2002) and mitigating these inequalities (Zhang & Hu, 2019). Research suggests that underprivileged children tend to perform better when supported by a cohesive learning community where both adults and children are involved. (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016) When home environments cannot provide adequate academic support, schools can play a critical role in bridging linguistic, cultural, and academic gaps by fostering inclusive, collaborative spaces. Creating such environments allows students from disadvantaged backgrounds to build social capital and access supportive networks that bolster their academic progress. While functionalist perspectives within the school reform literature suggests that schools can bridge these gaps in academic achievement with certain interventions like teacher-mediated social support, better resources and positive climates (Zhang & Hu, 2019), Bourdieu's practice theory suggests that academic achievement should be understand as a relational process where individuals who are socially predisposed with internalized habitus to navigate school environments and academic practices in particular ways, they also negotiate these social arrangements in ways that may reconfigure these social relations. Therefore, academic achievement should be understood as a dynamic and relational process, shaped by the interplay of individual capabilities and the social, cultural, and material resources embedded in students' environments. Hence, exploring how students make sense of their study practices within these contexts can offer valuable insights, enabling educational systems to support students better and harness their strengths, particularly those from marginalized and low-income communities. The research question we are exploring is

why academic achievement patterns vary between students of high and low SES within the same school context, despite equal institutional resources.

Conceptual framework

This study draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and Bourdieu's (2002) theory of capital and social reproduction, and his theory of practice. Bronfenbrenner's theory views human development as occurring within a nested set of environmental systems, each with a different degree of influence on the individual. The immediate contexts where daily interactions take place, such as home and school, are referred to as microsystems. The relationships between different settings, such as the impact of family involvement on school engagement, encompass the mesosystem. The exosystem consists of larger organizations and frameworks that indirectly affect the child, such as parental employment or educational regulations. Class, educational, and opportunity-related standards are among the broad cultural and societal ideas and values that are represented by the macrosystem. In contrast, Bourdieu (2002) focuses on how social inequality is perpetuated by the unequal distribution and transmission of capital in its economic, social, and cultural forms across generations. Capital exists in different forms and includes access to institutional resources (economic capital), networks and social relationships (social capital), and knowledge of prevailing cultural norms (cultural capital), all of which affect educational paths. Our study also incorporates Bourdieu's theory of practice, particularly his concept of habitus, to understand how individuals navigate and respond to their social world in meaningful ways. By combining these frameworks, the study places the learner in a multi-layered ecology of development, acknowledging that class-based capital and habitus not only determine how resources are mobilized and accessed within each layer, but also shape how they are mobilized and accessed across layers. ecological layer, but also reflects that the learner's role is to actively interpret and negotiate the conditions within which they are embedded.

Methods and Materials

Research Design and Setting

We used a single-sited qualitative case study design to understand why academic achievement varied among students from diverse SES despite studying in the same school. A case study was used to provide an in-depth analysis of participants' experiences. The study site was a private, unaided, English-medium school in Bengaluru that follows the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum and admits students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This school was chosen for our study as it offered a mix of students from high and low SES. The high SES students were day scholars who paid the full school fees and stayed with their parents. The school admitted low SES students in two ways, which was unique to it. Day scholars from low-SES backgrounds were admitted to the school under the Right to Education (RTE) Act. At the same time, the school also housed a residential facility for students from low-SES backgrounds who studied on scholarships provided by the school. The first author's role as an educator and psychologist, with a keen interest in equity and access to schooling, shaped the study. With their experience in both privileged and underprivileged educational settings, the researchers raised awareness of how academic achievement is influenced by structural and social factors, not just individual ability. Reflexivity was maintained through field notes and peer discussions to ensure that personal biases did not affect the study's goals, especially when interacting with participants of low SES.

Participants

The participants were 16 boys and 14 girls in grades 8 and 9, aged 13 to 15 years, identified through purposive sampling. Of these, 13 were high achievers, and 17 were low achievers. They were chosen based on their academic performance in the school examinations in the preceding academic year. The selection was validated with the teachers. Students in grade 10 were excluded because of their academic rigor. All the participants were proficient in English. In this study, SES was operationalized using indicators like parental education and occupation. Students were categorized as high-SES if their parents had a college degree or higher and held professional jobs. Students were categorized as low SES if both parents had attended high school or below and were employed in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs or unemployed.

Table 1 shows the distribution of participants by grade, SES, type of residence, parent occupation, and level of achievement.

Table 1

Details of Student Participants

Name	Grade	SES	Type of residence	Parent occupation	Level of achievement
Akash	9	High	Day scholar	Father: Stock trader Mother: Teacher	High
Tanmitha	9	High	Day Scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Corporate executive	High
Anaya	8	High	Day Scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Homemaker	High
Omi	8	High	Day Scholar	Father: Architect Mother: Teacher	High
Vibha	9	High	Day Scholar	Father: Engineer Mother: HR Professional	High
Divya	8	High	Day Scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Entrepreneur	High
Jayashree	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Daily wage labourer Mother: Daily wage labourer	High
Giri	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Labourer Mother: Unemployed	High
Rohit	8	Low	Hostelite	Mother: Tailor	High
Manisha	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Labourer Mother: House help	High
Vrinda	8	Low	Hostelite	Mother: Tailor	High
Anil	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Unemployed Mother: Cook	High
Lakshya	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Farmer Mother: Unemployed	High
Aryan	9	High	Day scholar	Father: HR Manager Mother: Dentist	Low
Vrisha	9	High	Day scholar	Father: Businessman Mother: Teacher	Low
Anagha	9	High	Day scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Corporate Executive	Low
Ajay	8	High	Day scholar	Father: Corporate executive Mother: Homemaker	Low
Parv	8	High	Day scholar	Father: Pharma executive Mother: Self-employed	Low
Chithra	8	High	Day scholar	Father: Teacher Mother: Teacher	Low
Bhumi	8	Low	Hostelite	Mother: Tailor	Low
Arpana	9	Low	Hostelite	Mother: Housemaid	Low
Bharat	8	Low	Hostelite	Mother: Daily wage worker	Low
Amal	8	Low	Hostelite	Father: Driver Mother: Housemaid	Low
Manas	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Cook Mother: Unemployed	Low
Hari	9	Low	Hostelite	Father: Driver	Low
Abhishek	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Driver Mother: Unemployed	Low
Yash	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Auto driver	Low
Mohit	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: weaver Mother: Homemaker	Low
Sahas	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Unemployed Mother: Caretaker	Low
Vini	8	Low	Day scholar	Father: Security Mother: Housekeeping	Low

***Source**: Author's own work*

Data Collection Method

The modified Kuppuswamy Scale, updated for 2019 (Saleem & Jan, 2019) and used for urban areas, was used to define SES in this study. The researchers developed a semi-structured interview schedule, which was reviewed by two experts, both with research and academic expertise. The interview schedule included questions like " Can you tell me your study routine on an average day?" " How do you usually prepare for an exam?" " If you have not understood a particular concept, how do you get it clarified?" Once the interview questions were validated, the researchers refined them and adjusted the probes based on the experts' suggestions. A pilot interview was conducted with a student to estimate the duration and understand potential issues. Permission was sought from the school

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authorities after discussing the study plan. Once permission was obtained from the school, consent was taken from all the participants. The first author conducted one-to-one interviews with each participant after ensuring that they were informed about the purpose of the study. Since the participants were proficient in English, all the interviews were conducted in English. Each interview, lasting about 30 minutes, was audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and verified for accuracy.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were coded line by line using NVivo 12, informed by the research question and guided by Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory approach. In this study, coding was done at two levels. In the initial coding, words, lines, segments, and incidents were closely studied to identify the in-vivo codes. Once the initial codes emerged, focused coding was conducted by selecting the most useful codes and examining them against the data. Analytical memos were written to document the emerging insights and reflections throughout the coding process. The second author, an expert in the field, reviewed the code to ensure reliability. These codes were then reorganized into themes, and we selected excerpts from the data that illustrate these themes for further contextual analysis in the paper.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research and Ethics Committee of the University (RCEC/00263). Assent was obtained from children, and they were also informed of their right not answer any specific question. Consent was also taken from parents to include their wards in the study. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants' confidentiality was assured, and their identifying details were replaced with pseudonyms.

Findings and Results

Table 2 shows the distribution of participants across different SES based on their academic scores.

Table 2

Distribution of participants based on academic scores

Group	High SES (Day scholars) (n=12)	Low SES(n=18) Residential	RTE
High achievers	6	6	1
Low achievers	6	6	5

Despite attending the same school and having access to the same teaching and learning resources, students from lower-SES backgrounds showed lower academic achievement. This disparity is further explained through relevant themes that emerged from the data.

Parental engagement is influenced by Socioeconomic status (SES)

Parental engagement in students' academics was found to be highly stratified by socioeconomic status (SES). Interviews revealed that the quality and nature of parental involvement were shaped by parental education, time availability, and resources. This involvement was viewed in two ways: cognitive support (help with subjects) and emotional support/monitoring.

High-achieving day scholars often had access to both forms of support, made possible by their parents' educational levels and availability. Akash, a high SES, high-achieving day scholar, shared about his layered support system:

"It's like I have tuition at home because my dad helps me with physics and math, my aunt with chemistry and biology, and my grandmother with Hindi. My dad is my biggest help. He sits by me while I study and makes sure I do. He monitors me when I am studying. "

This reflects Lareau's notion of concerted cultivation, in which middle-class families actively organize and structure their children's academic environment to mirror institutional expectations (Matsuoka, 2019).

In contrast, students from low-SES backgrounds, particularly those enrolled under the RTE Act, reported minimal parental involvement due to financial constraints and low educational levels. Yash, an RTE student, shared:

"After school, I go to either my grandfather's house or my elder brother's house because there will be no one at home… My father comes home at night after his work. On weekends, my sister and I stay at my brother's house because there will be no one at home".

This clearly suggests that students whose parents are better positioned in terms of money and education can access and mobilize the resources necessary for their children's educational success, highlighting the social reproductive nature of learning. In contrast, students from working-class families, many of whom are first-generation learners, struggle to convert action into intent and are at a disadvantage. Drawing on Bourdieu's (2002) theory of social reproduction, it is evident that the transmission of cultural capital is unevenly distributed, leading to cumulative (dis)advantages for students depending on their socioeconomic position.

Hostel support mirrors middle-class parenting practices.

Residential students identified hostel life as a key contributor to their academic success. This was similar to the informal support systems available to high SES day scholars at home. Rather than merely being a place of residence, the hostel replicated the structure, discipline, and encouragement often seen in middle-class homes. Rohit, a high-achieving residential student, stated:

"I usually approach the hostel home room teacher. If I get stuck, she gives me extra sums to practice."

Student narratives emphasized the hostel's strict timetable and consistent mentoring as essential for academic regulation. Manisha, a high-achieving residential student, explained:

"The hostel environment helps me. We have a fixed and tight schedule, and we have to follow it. There is no other way. There is always someone to motivate and monitor you. This helps me progress".

Jayashree, another residential high-achieving student, said,

"My hostel timetable helps me progress. It gives me enough time to study and plan, outside school hours; we actually get 6 hours to study in the hostel too. That helps me a lot. This does not happen for day scholar kids".

Thus, the hostel, rather than merely being a place of residence, replicated the structure and discipline often seen in middle-class homes. Research shows that middle-class families mobilize economic, social, and cultural capital to navigate their children's challenges, positively influencing educational outcomes (Antony-Newman et al., 2024). The hostel system paralleled what middle-class parents typically provide—regular study schedules, academic monitoring, and motivational support. Hari's interview illustrates this "emulated parental support" of hostel staff:

"My home room teacher, Nitesh sir, does not speak like a teacher. If it is studies, he teaches you like a teacher. But if it is something personal, he speaks to you as if you were his father. Sir constantly encourages me in everything I do".

These findings emphasize the role of institutions. practices in compensating for the lack of home-based academic resources. Research indicates that educational achievement is shaped not only by socioeconomic status but also by an environment that fosters community cohesion among adults and children (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016).

School is the primary learning resource for day scholars

Across SES categories, day scholars cited their school teachers as primary sources of academic support. However, for low-SES day scholars, school support compensated for the lack of academic assistance at home. Avi, a low SES day scholar, shared a typical coping strategy:

"I go to the subject teacher. Sometimes I go to Deepthi Ma'am, my old teacher."

Sahas, another low SES day scholar, described persistence in seeking clarity:

"If I don't understand, I won't be able to study. So, I approached the teacher for the particular subject during the lunch break. If I still don't understand, I go to Deepthi Ma'am and ask her."

Yash described his exam preparation strategy, which reveals the structured support he receives from a dedicated teacher, who is also a special educator:

"I start 15 days before the exams. Deepthi Ma'am helps me out. Every day, she teaches one chapter in one subject, and once I get home, I revise it again. I do math sums every day, and along with that, I revise whatever Deepthi mam taught. I also study Kannada every day. During exams, I do Kannada and math every day, and one subject that Deepthi Ma'am teaches that day".

However, the role of the special educator was found to be more remedial, focusing on subject-specific support rather than on students' lived realities. This

approach reflected a deficit orientation, framing students' struggles as a lack of skills and overlooking the social and cultural influences on learning. Such framing, while common in institutional discourse, risks overlooking the need for systemic change.

In contrast, Vibha, a high SES day scholar student, also sought help from teachers, but in the context of time lost to extracurricular activities:

"I have lost classes because of participating in MUN this year. At times like this, I approach my teachers. They really help us out. They give us extra time to complete work."

The comparative framing of Vibha and Yash illustrates how similar teacher dependence operates differently for each of them- for one, it supplements an already resource-rich environment; for the other, it replaces an absent one.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the study strategies of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to show that, despite similar access to school resources, educational disparities persist. We challenge the deficit approach, suggesting that study skills cannot be viewed as isolated, decontextualized technical competencies that some learners fail to acquire and internalize because of contextual limitations. Instead, we argue that such skills are deeply embedded within and shaped by one's sociocultural milieu.

Parental engagement emerged as a significant determinant of academic success, particularly for high-achieving day scholars from high SES families. This finding indicates the transmission of advantageous cultural capital across generations, as evidenced by everyday practices such as providing academic support at home, understanding school expectations, and placing a high value on educational success (Lareau, 2018). This is also consistent with prior research indicating that home-based parental involvement influences children's academic success (Boonk et al., 2018; Fatimaningrum, 2021; Kantova, 2024; Park & Holloway, 2017). Furthermore, parental education was a stronger predictor of academic outcomes than income (Sengonul, 2022), as it influences parental access to informational capital (Rodríguez et al., 2017). Also, parental social and cultural capital was associated with increased academic effort and better educational outcomes in children (Tan & Fang, 2023). In contrast, students from low-SES backgrounds faced financial and educational constraints that limited access to material resources. This suggests that access to capital- economic, social, and cultural- shapes the educational trajectories of children (Bourdieu, 2002). Their parents often lacked the economic capital to invest in private educational support and the cultural capital to engage effectively with school structures. While this observation is not new, most studies recommend greater parental involvement in education, which is not feasible for the parents of lower SES. Moreover, from a Bourdieusian perspective, we argue that it is not a failure of the parents but a failure of the school, as it continues to reproduce unequal social relations, in contrast to the modernist promise of transforming them. The findings reveal that the school's remedial education approach, facilitated by a special educator for low-SES RTE students, was framed through a deficit lens, emphasizing their shortcomings rather than adapting pedagogical strategies to be inclusive and empowering. This deficit-based approach focused on perceived shortcomings within students, often ignoring the cultural experiences they bring to the learning environment. Such a view can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and hinder inclusivity (Lareau, 2018). Incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum enhances their academic performance and sense of belongingness while also validating their identities.

Residential students, despite being from low-SES backgrounds, demonstrated relatively better academic performance, attributable to the structured supervision and routine of the hostel environment. This was similar to the "concerted cultivation" practices typical of middle-class parenting (Matsuoka, 2019), suggesting that institutional settings can serve as alternative sites for developing cultural capital. Furthermore, consistent with the existing literature (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016), the residential facility fostered a cohesive learning community in which both adults and peers were involved in enhancing students' academic engagement and sense of belonging. Our goal in highlighting this difference in approach and outcome is not to suggest that schools mimic middle-class parenting practices. Rather, we want to highlight that students' academic

achievement is shaped by cultural practices within the micro- and meso-systems, where schools can play a significant role. The hostel's practices suggest a cultural shift, yet not one that problematizes unequal social relations; rather, they borrow from middle-class cultural practices. In that sense, the hostel's approach is a colonial practice that can be harmful in culturally alienating children from their families. Hence, we use these findings to argue that while the academic achievement gap between children of different SES levels can be attributed to differences in study practices, these practices are cultural and embedded in unequal social relations. Hence, attempts to bridge the gap would require culturally-responsive pedagogies and whole-school practices. At the same time, we do not advocate a 'culture-as-panacea' approach; rather, we advocate a critical understanding of culture as shaped by unequal power relations between groups.

The dual role of the researcher, as an interviewer and an analyst, may have introduced interpretive bias, influencing both the framing of the questions and the analysis of responses. Also, the absence of triangulation, such as interviews with parents, teachers, or school administrators, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research can look into intersectionality, that is, how SES interacts with gender, race, class, and religion, and expand participant demographics, including geographical location. A longitudinal approach could help understand how access to capital influences academic trajectories over time. Further studies could also explore different types of school environments to compare and understand how they mitigate or amplify educational inequalities.

This study highlights that students' academic progression is not determined solely by access to similar school resources but is largely shaped by their ability to navigate and mobilize resources within their sociocultural networks. The findings explain how parental engagement, family background, and institutional support systems shape students' educational pathways, revealing the limitations of a deficit-based educational model. Although equitable access is enabled by policies such as the Right to Education and residential scholarships, structural inequalities persist, particularly in secondary education for students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Research shows that simply enrolling students from vulnerable and marginalized populations in private schools does not increase their access to equitable educational opportunities (Gowda, 2020). Structural barriers, such as a lack of social and cultural capital within families, affect children's access to resources and their learning (Das, 2020). This often leads to feelings of alienation and hinders their academic progress (Das, 2020).

To address these challenges, schools can develop teaching strategies and pedagogies that recognize the diverse forms of knowledge that students bring from their sociocultural backgrounds to the formal school environment. Furthermore, highlighting the success stories and lived experiences of students from minority backgrounds who have overcome systemic barriers can serve as powerful examples for informed educational practices. Schools can also enhance home-school collaboration by actively involving parents in their children's educational journey, thus fostering a supportive ecosystem that bridges home and school learning environments. Structured environments, such as the residential hostel in this study, can serve as compensatory spaces for developing academic discipline and a sense of belonging. Such approaches and practices should be strengthened as part of equity-driven interventions. The psychosocial challenge faced by minority students in India requires more holistic approaches that go beyond access to resources to create more inclusive cultures. This requires sustained attention to everyday practices and relational approaches that shape student learning.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. An ethical consideration in this study was that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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